



# Leadership and Combat Motivation: The Critical Task

Major John M. Spiszer, US Army

*They were probably as contented a group of American soldiery as had ever existed. They were like American youth everywhere. They believed the things their society had taught them to believe. They were cool, and confident and figured that the world was no sweat. It was not their fault that no one had told them that the real function of an army is to fight and that a soldier's destiny—which few escape—is to suffer, and if need be, to die.<sup>1</sup>*

—T.R. Fehrenbach

**T**HE STUDY OF military history and theory can yield many useful tools for the military professional. Important among these “tools” is an opportunity to gain insights on where to place limited and valuable emphasis, time and resources in the development of personal, professional and unit-leader development programs. An in-depth knowledge of military history and theory is indispensable to provide focus and utility to this task.<sup>2</sup>

In this vein, permit me to adapt a statement by noted military writer Michael Howard: It is the mission of the military professional in an age of peace to ensure that he and his subordinates are prepared for war.<sup>3</sup> The trick is to figure out which tasks are the most important in today's fast-paced, high-OPTEMPO (operations tempo) force and hope to avoid a historian's characterization similar to this article's opening quote.

Through studying military theory and history, I believe that the critical leader task is understanding how to motivate soldiers in combat. This encompasses both battlefield leadership and setting the proper conditions for combat during times of peace or lulls in fighting. All other tasks are of subordinate importance, and leaders should treat them so, ensuring that scarce resources, especially time and energy, are devoted to preparing soldiers to perform in combat.

## Battlefield Leadership

Current leader emphasis appears headed in a somewhat different direction. The Army's *Force XXI*

process—with its focus on computers, digitization, precision-guided munitions, and the like—takes emphasis away from soldiers, leaders and the combat environment and places it on machines. Emerging thought emphasizes attempting to dislocate, disintegrate and paralyze an enemy through simultaneous, distributed operations that produce asymmetric effects throughout an extended battlespace.

While for many years the argument was between annihilation or exhaustion through attrition or maneuver, a third pattern has emerged—paralysis through cybershock. These patterns are all “complementary and mutually reinforcing” and lead to the disintegration of the enemy by acting simultaneously on his physical, logistic and cybernetic domains.<sup>4</sup>

However, what seems to be lost is the recognition that at the cutting edge of conducting attrition, maneuver or cybershock is some soldier who is either firing or is in a position to fire a destructive round or missile at other living people—the enemy. No matter what technology brings to the battlefield, we must not lose sight of an enduring truth: “Essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war. Fighting, in turn, is a trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter. Naturally moral strength must not be excluded, for psychological forces exert a decisive influence on the elements involved in war.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, while leaders must know, understand and be able to employ the weapons and tools of war in the physical and cybernetic domains, the moral or psychological domain is more important, for it controls the actions of men in combat. It is important to remember that “the Army's fundamental purpose is to fight and win the Nation's wars by establishing conditions for lasting peace through land force dominance.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, fighting, and getting soldiers to fight well, is our primary job and must be treated as such.



*[Proper training] counters unrealistic expectations of combat so that the soldier is not overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of isolation and fear when they occur. As Fehrenbach put it, "For his own sake and for that of those around him, a man must be prepared for the awful, shrieking moment of truth when he realizes he is all alone on a hill ten thousand miles from home, and that he may be killed in the next second."*

## Combat Motivation

Military leaders must spend a large part of their time studying and discovering what motivates men in combat, what they must accomplish and what they have to do to make that happen. The individual soldier's task is essentially the same—fire at the enemy or support those who fire at the enemy. The focus should be on the combat soldier who actually fires at the enemy—the soldier who must maneuver, wear down or bring to bear destructive power to shock, annihilate or exhaust the enemy on the battlefield.

This is not a new thought for the US Army. It was understood and believed through the World Wars, briefly forgotten going into the Korean War and has again lost currency since Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Historian S.L.A. Marshall captured the importance of this issue by noting that "What we need in battle is more and better fire." He believed that the greater the ratio of effective fire to that of the enemy, the greater the chance of success, which still holds true today.<sup>8</sup> Fire, or the ability to fire, is the ultimate arbiter of combat and is essential to all patterns of attrition, maneuver and cybershock.

To Marshall, producing this effective fire is a function of mobility and morale, with morale being the most critical and the element which needs ad-

ressing before, during and after combat.<sup>9</sup> Leaders need to set the conditions prior to combat, influence their soldiers' morale during combat and assess and adapt methods after a fight to ensure success in the next battle. Success can be defined as achieving a greater rate of fire than the enemy due to enhanced combat performance, which is a direct result of combat motivation and morale. Setting the conditions prepares men for combat by providing them the necessary mental and physical tools. Influencing soldiers during combat includes alleviating the negative impact of fear and other combat environment elements on the individual soldier so he can function effectively and, ultimately, fire at the enemy.

While the Army does not discount the importance of the relationship between leadership, morale and combat motivation, it does not do enough to stress this importance or incorporate it into the organizational fabric. A draft of the upcoming US Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, proposes adding morale as a principle of war and devotes a section to the moral domain of conflict.<sup>10</sup> As evidenced by studies done after both *Operations Just Cause* and *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* "battlefield leadership at all levels is an element of combat power," and the Army's preferred leadership style emphasizes face-to-face contact in order to see the battlefield,

A 25th Infantry Division (Light) soldier at a field training exercise.

***No matter what technology brings to the battlefield, we must not lose sight of an enduring truth: "Essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war. Fighting, in turn, is a trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter. Naturally moral strength must not be excluded, for psychological forces exert a decisive influence on the elements involved in war."***

to impart and strengthen esprit and morale through personal example and to personally communicate with subordinates.<sup>11</sup> In addition, all military schools provide leadership instruction and the new FM 22-100, *Army Leadership*, will provide comprehensive doctrine on the subject.

Our current doctrine and focus only mark the starting point, which now is a rather sterile environment that defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction and motivation."<sup>12</sup> What is missing are the essential linkages between leadership and combat motivation. Combat motivation can improve soldiers' combat performance and increase their rate of fire. But other questions require answers, such as: What should a leader do to prepare his soldiers to face the rigors of combat? What should the Army, or its senior leaders, do as an institution to prepare its soldiers for combat? What should a leader do to produce fire during combat?

## Morale Factors

The key issue appears to be *combat motivation*, which is a function of morale factors tempered by

the combat environment. A leader's duty is to strengthen the morale factors while mitigating the impact of the environment. Thus, the leader must focus his efforts on identifying the morale factors he can influence or develop and on identifying how he can mitigate the combat environment and, thus, reinforce his soldiers' will to fight while minimizing the reflex of flight.

Morale factors are many and include: primary groups or small-unit cohesion, unit esprit, manpower policies, socialization, training, discipline/duty, leadership, ideology/cause, rewards, preconceptions of combat, aspects of combat, combat stress, combat behavior, information, background and demonization of the enemy, to name just some.<sup>13</sup> Or, as Stephen E. Ambrose asked and answered in *Citizen Soldier* concerning the combat soldiers in World War II: "What kept them going? Discipline, to be sure, just as in the German army, and unit cohesion, and training. But for many, it was a sense of having no option and a realization that the only way out of combat was to annihilate the German army. . . . The GIs fought because they had to. What held them together was not country and flag, but unit cohesion."<sup>14</sup>

Of all these, the unit leader has direct influence on only a few.<sup>15</sup> Obviously a leader's own tactical and technical competence and personal example, and that of his junior leaders, are important factors in forging the willingness of soldiers to follow orders during combat. In addition, the development of primary groups or small-unit cohesion, to include unit esprit, falls under the purview of the unit leader, even though unit cohesion is impacted by outside influences such as Army assignment policies. Other factors include training, familiarization, discipline and rewards. Army leaders need to ensure that their policies and practices in these areas directly contribute to their soldiers' ability to function in combat.

## Unit Cohesion

The key morale factor that the leader can influence before, during and after combat is *unit cohesion*. An important ingredient in units sticking together and performing under fire is that the individual soldier not feel he is alone. Unit cohesion is an absolutely critical and basic morale factor.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the Army's senior leaders can influence this factor through personnel and assignment policies, which are deficient in today's Army with its rapid rotational policies which promote instability rather than stability in our combat and supporting units.<sup>17</sup> Unit leaders influence this factor every day prior to hostilities through local assignments, training and all aspects of command presence and information. During combat, the leader influences cohesion through personal ex-

ample and by enabling and ensuring communication and the flow of information. Interpersonal communication reduces soldier isolation on the battlefield and allows him to manage his fear through the presence, reliability and reassurance of his comrades. Once your soldiers do this, they can unite and regain their cohesion, allowing them to plan and ultimately to act, which manifests itself in fire and movement directed against the enemy.<sup>18</sup> Assessment of individual and leader performance after the battle and subsequent improvement of techniques prepare the unit for combat in the future. That familiar face-to-face Army leadership style is absolutely critical and should be maintained.

Mitigating the combat environment is a related issue because it includes noise, darkness, fear, weapons effects, filth, hate, moral degradation, death, horrible wounds and a host of other characteristics.<sup>19</sup> The overall impact is to erode the morale factors' positive influence on combat motivation, resulting in reduced combat performance and fire. By maintaining unit cohesion and unit esprit, leaders can mitigate the effects of the battlefield environment.<sup>20</sup> Units with strong values and historical pride also retain their motivation and drive in the most trying circumstances. The US Marine Corps, with its proud traditions and unit lineages, is perhaps the best example of unit esprit's impact in the US military.<sup>21</sup>

Leaders can also mitigate this environment through proper training that counters unrealistic expectations of combat so that the soldier is not overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of isolation and fear when they occur. As Fehrenbach put it, "For his own sake and for that of those around him, a man must be prepared for the awful, shrieking moment of truth when he realizes he is all alone on a hill ten thousand miles from home, and that he may be killed in the next second."<sup>22</sup> In addition, the leaders and staff officers must understand this environment as well, in order to both prepare their men for this environment and to understand what it does to them.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the leader needs to economize his men's powers during and immediately prior to combat, since a tired soldier frightens more easily and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> The unit leader has direct responsibility for training, physical training and soldier load issues. However, the Army's senior leaders need to adopt policies and provide equipment that supports realistic training and lightens the soldier's load.

Thus, unit leaders can promote combat motivation and mitigate the effects of the battlefield by:

- Supporting and promoting small-unit cohesion every day.
- Ensuring communication among individual

soldiers during battle.

- Encouraging soldier communication during difficult and realistic tactical training.
- Providing information prior to, during and after battle. Making sure the chain of command works in passing information from higher to lower commands, not just lower to higher.
- Developing programs to foster unit esprit through historical material, regimental system

---

*The US Army understands the importance of combat motivation and a leader's responsibilities pertaining to its development and maintenance. However, what is not well understood is how the two are related, other than through platitudes and definitions. . . . Nevertheless, it is an important responsibility of every Army leader to do more than just recognize this importance, and take the next step to develop and practice methods for improving combat motivation.*

---

customs and affiliation and other methods. This is especially important for a professional army facing limited operations.<sup>25</sup>

- Focusing unit professional development and leadership instruction on the linkages between the leader, combat motivation and your soldiers' performance or ability to fire at the enemy.

- Ensuring soldiers are physically and mentally tough.

- Managing soldiers loads to economize their strengths. Resource units and operations with vehicles to carry loads so soldiers do not have to carry them.

- Planning, preparing and executing demanding and realistic training. This is critical because "it is admittedly terrible to force men to suffer during training, or even sometimes, through accident, to kill them. But there is no other way to prepare them for the immensely greater horror of combat."<sup>26</sup>

In supporting this effort, the Army's senior leaders should ensure policies and resource allocation efforts also focus on combat motivation issues. This can be done by:

- Developing manpower policies consistent with maintaining small-unit cohesion. Avoid replacement policies that keep soldiers isolated and do not promote cohesion.

- Providing information and historical material and enforcing policies, such as the regimental system, designed to enhance unit esprit.<sup>27</sup>

- Developing equipment that enables small-unit communications down to the individual soldier level

and lightens his load. Consider force modernization and reorganization to provide vehicles to carry loads to conserve the soldier's physical resources.<sup>28</sup>

- Promoting decentralized execution of training and operations.
- Providing the support and resources necessary for realistic training that fully incorporates all available means to replicate the battlefield environment, consistent with soldier safety requirements.
- Refocusing leadership doctrine on improving combat motivation and on leading men in combat and preparing them to fire at and kill the enemy, rather than on management practices.

While these methods and policies are not all inclusive and do not provide definitive techniques, they do provide a starting point. Each leader needs to devote time and effort to study this issue and tailor his methods to the specific unit and situation he faces.

The US Army understands the importance of combat motivation and a leader's responsibilities pertaining to its development and maintenance. However, what is not well understood is how the two are related, other than through platitudes and definitions. The Army does not emphasize the practical aspects of combat motivation or the methods available to focus on it. Nevertheless, it is an im-

portant responsibility of every Army leader to do more than just recognize this importance, and take the next step to develop and practice methods for improving combat motivation.

Leaders must make it their business to understand the linkages between victory, fire, combat performance, combat motivation, morale factors, combat environment and leadership. This is a task of first importance and should take precedence over digitization, force modernization, quarterly training briefings, command inspections, mission-essential task lists and the other priorities in the seemingly inexhaustible list of things to do and know in today's Army. The bottom line remains—it is the leader's primary duty to motivate his soldiers in combat. To do that, he must know how to enhance and develop morale factors while using them and other means to mitigate the trauma of combat. There is never enough time to do everything, but this task cannot be neglected.

As Fehrenbach cautioned years ago, "A nation that does not prepare for all the forms of war should then renounce the use of war in national policy. A people that does not prepare to fight should then be morally prepared to surrender. To fail to prepare soldiers and citizens for limited bloody ground action, and then to engage in it, is folly verging on the criminal."<sup>29</sup> **MR**

## NOTES

1. T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 94.
2. The lengthy notes following are not meant to overwhelm the reader with documentation but to provide a starting point for the reader to begin his task of studying military history and its interpretation as it relates to leadership and combat motivation.
3. This is an adaptation of Michael Howard's quote: "Still it is the task of military science in an age of peace to prevent the doctrines from being too badly wrong." Taken from Michael Howard, "Military Science in an Age of Peace," *RUSI, Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies* (March 1974), 7.
4. James J. Schneider develops this idea in "Black Lights: Chaos, Complexity and the Promise of Information Warfare," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Spring 1997), 26-28.
5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 127.
6. US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-1, *The Army* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 14 June 1994), 2.
7. Fehrenbach provides an excellent examination and analysis of this issue and how it impacted the Korean War.
8. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 23.
9. See both of Marshall's books on this subject, where he fully develops these ideas. In *Men Against Fire*, he focuses on the morale of the soldier and in *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, January 1980), he focuses on the mobility of the soldier.
10. FM 100-5, *Operations (Final Draft)* (Washington, DC: GPO, 5 August 1997), 2-10, 2-11, and 4-5.
11. Susan Canedy, ed., US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-100-1, *Leadership and Command on the Battlefield. Operation Just Cause and Desert Storm* (Fort Monroe, VA: TRADOC, 1992), cover, 13, 17 and 41.
12. FM 22-100, *Military Leadership* (Washington, DC: GPO, July 1990), 1.
13. Both Anthony Kellest in *Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston: Nijhoff Publishing, 1984), and James McPherson in *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) develop these and other contributing factors of morale leading to combat motivation.
14. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldier* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997),

393 and 473.

15. Fehrenbach focuses on different morale factors for various categories of soldiers. Professional soldiers fight from discipline, pride and training. Citizen soldiers fight from motivation and ideals. Both are equally valid, but the leader must understand what type of soldier he is leading. Fehrenbach argued that World War II was fought with the citizen-soldier and the leaders got it right, while the Korean War was fought by professional soldiers and we got it wrong by treating them as citizen-soldiers. See pages 146 and 183.
16. Ambrose, 88, 332, 393 and 473.
17. Ambrose thoroughly examines the impact of a poor replacement policy in a combat theater on pages 275-279 and 286-287.
18. Ideas synthesized from Marshall's *Men Against Fire*.
19. For an excellent firsthand account of the true horrors of combat, see E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
20. Ambrose describes how the German infantry in World War II communicated during battle, 192. Sledge also makes mention of this phenomenon by the Japanese throughout his book.
21. Three key factors allowed the Marines in Sledge's book to persevere and triumph against the horrendous combat conditions they faced on Peleliu and Okinawa: pride in the Marine Corps and the unit they were in, training and unit cohesion.
22. Fehrenbach, 415 and 420. Also see Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 284.
23. Ambrose, 166.
24. F.D.G. Williams summarizes S.L.A. Marshall's concepts presented here in *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the United States Army* (Fort Monroe, VA: Office of the Command Historian, TRADOC, 1994), 79 and 80.
25. Fehrenbach, 640.
26. *Ibid.*, 182.
27. For a discussion on the merits of the regimental system, see GEN John A. Wickham Jr., *Light Infantry Divisions (White Paper 1984)* (Washington, DC: GPO, 16 April 1984).
28. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my monograph on "The Light Infantry Company and Tactical Mobility: A Step in Which Direction," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies), 18 December 1997.
29. Fehrenbach, 637.

*Major John M. Spiszer is the chief of plans, 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized), Wuerzburg, Germany. He received a B.S. from the United States Military Academy, an M.S.A. from Central Michigan University and is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). He has held a variety of command and staff positions in the Continental United States and Hawaii, including aide de camp to the deputy commandant, CGSC; program analyst, Program Analysis and Evaluation Directorate, Office of the Army Chief of Staff, Washington, DC; Army intern, Joint Staff, J5 Strategy Division, Washington, DC; and commander, Company A, 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division (Light), Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. His article, "FM 100-5 and Information Age Warfare" appeared in the September-October 1997 issue of Military Review.*